

Green jobs can help fuel state's recovery

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As Californians celebrated the 40th anniversary of Earth Day last week, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was in Silicon Valley, touring clean technology companies and extolling the environmental revolution as an economic engine that could help the state shake off the lingering effects of the Great Recession.

Schwarzenegger noted that both firms he visited — Serious Materials, which produces energy-efficient windows, and SunPower, a solar panel company — have seen substantial job growth over the past few years despite the recession. SunPower, for instance, has grown from 35 employees in 2003 to 5,000 today and is now hiring 300 workers.

“I can think of no better way to celebrate Earth Day than to highlight action that is good for both California’s environment and its economy,” Schwarzenegger said, adding that the companies proved that “what’s good for the environment is good for the economy.”

Not everyone agrees with that assessment, of course. Critics complain that California’s environmental laws have cost more jobs than they’ve created. Valero Energy and other oil companies are floating a ballot measure to indefinitely postpone Schwarzenegger’s hallmark piece of environmental legislation, Assembly Bill 32, which sets deadlines for moving toward sustainable energy. And skeptics question how many jobs are actually being created or whether all the talk of a Green Economy is just hype.

To answer such questions, the California Employment Development Department last week released its first-ever report on environment-related employment. What it found, based on a survey of 15,500 companies, is that the green revolution is already a vibrant part of the state’s economy, creating jobs even during the recession. And judging from what’s happening with local environmental firms, the green economy appears to be growing.

According to the report, nearly half a million workers throughout the state are involved in producing green products or providing green services, led by 93,000 in manufacturing; 68,000 in construction; 42,000 in professional, scientific and technical services; and 38,000 in recycling and other waste management activities. After including smaller industries, the total represents nearly 4 percent of the state's work force.

"This survey shows that green jobs are distributed more broadly through our economy than previously thought," said Victoria Bradshaw, who heads the state's Labor and Workforce Development Agency.

In the Southern Border region, comprising San Diego and Imperial counties, 40,600 workers are involved in environmental work, with construction the dominant employer. According to the report, roughly 8,300 green jobs in the region involve construction, ranging from retrofitting homes to make them more energy-efficient, redoing plumbing systems to use less water, installing solar panels on rooftops and doing heavy-duty work at power-generation sites.

Despite the massive downturn in construction, that type of job seems likely to keep growing as government agencies and private businesses push for more energy-efficient, water-saving buildings, which typically save money in the long run. The Associated General Contractors of America, a construction industry association, released a report last week estimating that by 2015, there will be as many as 15 million nonresidential green construction projects nationwide, breathing life into an industry hard hit by the recession.

"These projects aren't just a great source for renewable energy; they are a promising opportunity to renew our industry," said Ted Aadland, president of the Associated General Contractors of America.

In San Diego, for instance, Mayor Jerry Sanders celebrated Earth Day by launching Civic Centre Green, a program that will offer incentives for downtown buildings to incorporate more green features, such as rooftop gardens that provide insulation as well as generate oxygen and absorb toxins from the air.

Sanders noted that with the adoption of the state's CalGreen building codes in January 2011, California will have some of the most stringent environmental building standards in the country, but he said he wants to reward developers who exceed those standards, through such incentives as development code variances and a streamlined permit process.

Beyond construction, San Diego County is also generating green jobs by developing new technologies to clean the environment.

Holly Lepre, vice president of Cleantech San Diego, an association of environmental technology companies, said that a significant number of the region's 700 or so clean-technology companies are in hiring mode these days, including Sapphire Energy and Synthetic Genomics, which are developing fuels from algae; Siliken Renewable Energy, a Spanish solar energy company that is using San Diego as a base for its manufacturing and installation activities; PCN Co., which is developing some of the technical underpinnings for the nation's electricity grids; Invergy, a wind-power company; and Clearedge Power, which is developing fuel cells.

Lepre said those five companies plan to add 1,000 to 1,500 workers over the next two years, "and those are just a few examples, which offer a pretty good indication of the potential of this sector to stimulate the economy."

She added that during a time when investors have been skittish about risky ventures, a couple of San Diego's leading clean-tech companies have been attracting millions of dollars in investments.

"That money led to the creation of several hundred good, well-paying jobs," she said. "And that trend will continue to go upward."

To help the green sector grow further, a number of stimulus-backed programs have been introduced in

Sacramento over the past two months, including:

- A low-interest lending program run by the California Energy Commission, offering loans of \$5,000 to \$5 million to clean-energy manufacturers to help them expand or retool their production facilities.
- A program to cut financing costs for homes and businesses that are being retrofitted for energy efficiency. State authorities estimate the program could generate 10,500 jobs, mostly in construction.
- A sales tax exemption for green-tech manufacturing equipment. State Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Pacoima, said the bill should encourage green companies to open sites in California to take advantage of the tax breaks.

Schwarzenegger says such incentives are important, but adds that a key reason California is generating more green jobs than most other states is its tough environmental laws, especially AB 32, which commits the state to slash its greenhouse emissions to 1990 levels over the next 10 years. Schwarzenegger credits the law with sharpening the state's focus on energy efficiency and development of alternative energy sources.

But the future of that law is now in doubt because Texas oil giant Valero Energy is pushing to get the initiative onto the November ballot that would overturn AB 32.

In a fact sheet on its website, the initiative's supporters claim AB 32 will cost the state up to 1.1 million jobs because of added costs to employers and force Californians out of their "trucks, minivans, SUVs, muscle cars and classic cars in favor of vehicles that are smaller, more expensive to purchase and less safe."

On Earth Day, Schwarzenegger railed against the "greedy Texas oil companies that want to come in here and spend millions of dollars to roll back AB 32 and take out all our environmental laws, because they don't like that there is alternative energy being created. ... They want to go and verschmutzt the world."

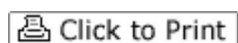
Schwarzenegger got a laugh from using the German word "verschmutzt," which means "mess up" or "pollute." But San Diego environmental attorney Cory Briggs said a more compelling argument would be to point out how many jobs AB 32 and other environmental laws are generating throughout the state.

"A lot of critics often portray a false choice between creating jobs or cleaning the environment," Briggs said. "But that's just not true. If you try to build things with an environmental perspective, it might be a little more complicated than it would otherwise, but there are also more job opportunities for the construction workers as well as for technical folks on the design, construction and operations side. And even if that increases the cost of construction, it pencils out over the long run because of the improvements you've made to your energy efficiency. From an economic standpoint, I think one's clearly better than the other."

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